Lafayette Historical Society Newsletter

P.O. Box 133 . Lafayette, California 94549

President: Marechal Duncan (283-6812)
Newsletter Editor: Elly Conrad (284-1555)

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President's Message

With the summer and vacations behind us we head into our plans for an active fall and winter for our society. Keith Blakeney has accepted the position of Programs and Tours Chairman and has been appointed as a member of our executive board. We have great expectations for Keith and his enthusiasm. If you have ideas for programs or tours, please contact Keith at 284-2221. We have arranged to join with Orinda and/or Moraga Historical Societies on some events which gives promise for more activities.

We have accepted, with regret, the resignation of Frances Hunt from our board. Frances, for health reasons, has resigned as a director, but will continue in her job of mailing our newsletter.

We are seeking a person or persons to assist in maintaining our archives at the Lafayette library. The archives are the backbone of the Society. The archives consist of many pictures, articles, stories and memorabilia that we need help indexing and filing. In addition, if you have a computer, will you help in compertizing our system? Please contact Wilbur Somerton at 284-9785 or your president at 283-6812 if you wish to support your society by helping with our archives.

Cordially,

Marechal Duncan

Bill Wakeman Writes on Lafayette History

In the summer 1995 issue of ***Lafayette Vistas*** the first of a series of articles on the history of Lafayette appeared under the heading "Historic Snapshots." The second in this series will be in the next issue, and it will cover the naming of the town. Bill Wakeman and Abby Leason collaborate on writing these vignettes; Steve Faulk and Bob Adams edit them. ***Lafayette Vistas*** is published quarterly by the City of Lafayette.

THE TOWN HALL: THEN AND NOW

Elly Conrad

In the early part of this century, when Lafayette was still just a small rural town surrounded by small farms, a group of local citizens got together to find ways to better their community. Discussions involved road building and maintenance, postal service, and the possibility of constructing a hall for social events. The formation of the Lafayette Improvement Club (LIC) in 1911 helped to give the people of Lafayette the impetus needed to build one of our most treasured historic buildings, the Town Hall.

The fund-raising efforts and community involvement in the goal of building a Town Hall illustrate how closely knit Lafayette was in those days. Citizens gave freely of their time and were as generous as they could be with their money. The project was given a big boost by Frank and Rosa Ghiglione, who deeded the building site to the LIC. In addition, they donated $200 towards building costs. Within a month, dances and gala suppers were being held on a regular basis to raise more funds needed for construction. The Lafayette Improvement Corporation was formed and shares of stock were sold for more revenue.

In 1914, the existing structure was built with the help of hired day labor and the men of Lafayette, who worked week-ends and evenings. The Town Hall's completion was celebrated with a Grand Opening Ball, a preview of the weekly dances that would be held there for many years. Early dances were attended every Saturday by hundreds of people throughout Contra Costa and the Bay Area. Trains which arrived at the West Lafayette Station at the end of School Street carried people traveling from Oakland, Walnut Creek, Martinez, and Antioch. The price of admission to these dances included dinner and entertainment. Food was prepared by the women of Lafayette, children helped with decorations, and supplies were provided at cost by Robert McNeil, the owner of The Pioneer Store and one of the founding members of the LIC. Entertainment came in the form of live music and a player piano.

Although the Town Hall has always been associated with entertainment, two of its primary functions were originally as a place where community events could be held and where money could be raised for improvements to Lafayette and surrounding areas. In the early 1920's, fundraisers were held to construct a Post Office in Lafayette. During World War II, dances at the Town Hall raised money for the Red Cross and other relief efforts. In the 1920's and 1930's, the building was also used as an auditorium for graduation ceremonies for Lafayette Grammar School.

The costs of maintaining the building and keeping it up to the safety standards for public use were high. Even with donations made by members of the community, by the 1930's the Town Hall had fallen into disrepair. Although the possibility of tearing down the Town Hall was discussed, the LIC voted to remodel. Windows were screened, and reflectors and electric lights were installed. Money was raised for further renovations by recalling old stock issued since 1913, and issuing new stock. Subscription sales and other fundraising events brought in more money needed to lay new flooring, build a fire escape, install knotty pine interior finish to the building, and purchase two oil-burning heaters.

Over the next few years, the Town Hall was called into service as a temporary library room, and on occasion, as temporary classrooms while new facilities were being built to accomodate the ever growing population. A new roof was installed, dinnerware was purchased, and a sink and stove was donated by a local resident. The Board of Directors decided to make the building available to all civic organizations for the cost of monthly maintenance and utilities.

In 1941, the LIC was replaced by the Lafayette Improvement Association (LIA). A new constitution and by-laws were adopted and the title to the Town Hall was transferred in 1944. Although the Town Hall has been used occasionally throughout the years to show films, its use as a setting for theatrical performances greatly increased in the 1940's. The Lafayette Playshop, a division of a forerunner to the Lafayette Women's Club, was the first theatrical troupe to perform regularly at the Town Hall. Their opening night was December 3, 1941, right before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

With the onset of U.S. involvement in World War II, the Town Hall was designated as a Red Cross First Aid Station and Refugee Collection Center. In November of 1942, a fire in the building caused considerable damage to the Town Hall. Materials for the necessary repairs had to be procured through the War Production Board Projects Requirement Plan. A long wait was anticipated, which caused discouragement and discussions about selling the building for lumber. Luckily, insurance money and the necessary materials came through. The Town Hall was nearly completely repaired by April of 1943.

Various organizations used the Town Hall regularly throughout the 1940's. The Playshop, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and church groups all held events there. Beginning in 1947, the Straw Hat Reviews rented the building for four consecutive summers and held six performances weekly.

During the 1950's, discussions began about rezoning the land surrounding the Town Hall for commercial purposes. The group in favor of rezoning was headed by Russell Bruzzone, an heir to the Frank and Rosa Ghiglione. His intentions were to construct a medical/dental building nearby, and he believed that Moraga Road would become a major thoroughfare making commercial zoning appropriate for the area. The LIA voted to keep zoning unchanged.

In 1955, a group called the Dramateurs replaced the Straw Hatters as one of the main theatrical troupes to play at the Town Hall. Their first performances in the Town Hall were held "in the round" because the stage was determined to be unsafe. First organized in 1944 by housewives in Orinda, the Dramateurs spent thousands of dollars over the next decades on improvements to the building. They signed a lease agreement with the LIA in 1958. In 1956, a group called the Laf-Frantics also began performing at the Town Hall. This song and dance ensemble was started by the Suburban Women's Club of Lafayette and the Junior Chamber of Commerce. All proceeds from their performances were donated to various non-profit organizations, including the Town Hall and the Lafayette Community Center. Both the Dramateurs and the Laf-Frantics were to entertain area residents for many years to come.

In 1964, heirs to the Ghiglione and Bruzzone families began a legal dispute with the LIA over the ownership of the Town Hall. The families believed that because the building was no longer being used primarily as a Town Hall, its ownership should revert back to them. After the LIA presented evidence of the gift given half a century before by Frank and Rosa Ghiglione, it was allowed to retain title.

More problems were to arise later that year. The State Fire Marshall, along with the Contra Costa Building Department, found the Town Hall to be structurally unsafe and it was shut down. An inspection made by an independent engineering firm resulted in less dire findings- structurally the building was safe but in need of some improvements. A successful "Save the Town Hall" fundraising drive was started with the combined efforts of the LIA and the Dramateurs. By the following February, the building was ready again for public use.

The Laf-Frantics ended their run at the Town Hall in 1986, after thirty years. In 1991, the Dramateurs were replaced by a group known as the Lafayette Town Hall Theatre. One of the goals of this new group has been to bring in younger audiences by presenting more modern theatre, including somewhat controversial works such as M. Butterfly. In the last three years, two Shellie Awards have been won by plays presented by the Town Hall.

From the beginning, the Town Hall has served our community in countless ways- as a place where money could be raised for improvements to the city; by offering much needed extra space when local facilities were unable to keep up with rapid growth; and as a place where people could gather to be entertained by local talent. The building is still available to community organizations for non-profit purposes, but once again it is in need of some renovation work. The Lafayette Town Hall Theatre has recently installed a new roof and air conditioning, and is seeking donations for the installation of handicapped access ways, elevators, and new restrooms. On November 19th, the Suburban Women's Club and the Lafayette Women's Club will be hosting a fundraiser at the Town Hall, consisting of a reception with wine and appetizers followed by a performance of Melrose Stories. Here is a chance for members of the community to give new life to the Town Hall. The sponsors are also hoping that any past members of the Laf-Frantics will be able to be there to remember the good times spent there. Ticket prices are $25. For more information, please contact Jan Emmerich at 283-5775.

Editor's Note: Many thanks to the following: A Town Hall for Lafayette, Ruth Dyer; The Improvers of Lafayette, Andrew Young; La Fayette, A Pictorial History, Sandy Kimball. Thanks also to Dick and Jeri Burnside, Jan Emmerich, Jim Stalker, Ken Van Rheem, Glenn Vivrette, Bill Wakeman and Betsey Young.

CAN YOU HELP?
Due to unexpected schedule conflicts, I will be unable to finish my term as editor. If you have a word processor and can take over for me, please call Elly Conrad at 284-1555 or Marechal Duncan at 283-6812. Thank you! -Ed.

1995-1996 OFFICERS
AND COMMITTEE CHAIRS

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IF YOUR ADDRESS LABEL HAS A STAR ON IT, IT'S TIME TO PAY YOUR DUES!
THANK YOU!

LAFAYETTE HISTORY--1900 TO PRESENT

Bill Wakeman

Throughout Lafayette's 20th century history, some of the main concerns of the people that live here were traffic, road conditions, law officers' response time, and land use. These were under the jurisdiction of the Contra Costa County government in Martinez. The local supervisor was more interested in areas other than Lafayette, with the net result being that Lafayette's wants were ignored or disregarded.

The first traffic problem was reported in 1916, after the automobile had started to appear and deliveries of large objects were still being made by horse drawn wagons. The hotel on the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard was built out to the curb line, a condition which required wagon drivers to drive their horses out into the intersection to check for oncoming traffic. This continued until the hotel burned down in 1928 and the use of horse drawn wagons was discontinued.

With the completion of the Broadway Low Level tunnel in 1937, there was a population growth in Central Contra Costa County. Mt. Diablo Boulevard was the most convenient way for people who lived east of Lafayette to drive to the Bay Area, and it became particularly congested during commute hours. It was almost impossible for pedestrians to cross Mt. Diablo Boulevard, which caused many businesses on the north side of the street to do very poorly. Many of those that stayed would fail, while some moved to the other side of the street and succeeded.

In 1938, the population of Lafayette grew at such a rate that 225 new water meters were installed, 66 new telephone connections were made, 300 post office boxes were added, and 80 new homes were completed. The schools were so overcrowded that the Town Hall was used for temporary classrooms. A $25,000 bond issue for school construction was passed, and a $15,000 grant from the WPA was added. This population explosion continued until World War II, then it came to a screeching halt. In 1939, the population of Lafayette was approximately 4,000. During this period, continued requests from the citizens of Lafayette for stop lights at the intersection of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard were denied.

After World War II, the population explosion in central Contra Costa County was more intense with traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard much greater than before. In 1938, there were 20,355 cars per day on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. In 1947, Cal-Trans installed stop lights at the intersection of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. By 1951, traffic had increased to 30,000 cars per day, with expectations that it would increase to 70,000 by 1970. A proposed bypass was completed in 1957, but it didn't have any central Lafayette on-off ramps. This problem was solved with the final BART layout.

The original BART proposal of 1957 placed the Lafayette Station at the intersection of Pleasant Hill road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard, with tracks running on Olympic Boulevard. How the tracks would run from Orinda through Lafayette was never explained. The county supervisors voted against the BART plan. The final approved plan placed the Lafayette BART Station in central Lafayette, and added central Lafayette on-off ramps to Freeway 24. Although this has helped to ease traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, traffic on Moraga road is creating an overload at its intersection with Mt. Diablo Boulevard. More on that later.

LAFAYETTE HISTORY BUFFS TO TOUR HISTORIC MARE ISLAND

The Lafayette Historical Society has planned a guided tour of Mare Island Naval shipyard, founded over 140 years ago, and the Vallejo Naval & Historical Museum.

We will tour the Naval Shipyard including St. Peter's Chapel, built in 1901 with its world famous Tiffany stained glass windows, the Victorian mansions built to house the officers' families, the cemetery, Alden Park (site on which Admiral David Farragut founded the shipyard in 1854) and others.

This will be followed by a short audio-video presentation at the museum on the history of Vallejo and Mare Island, and a gourmet luncheon prepared by the museum guild in the Museum's Hall of History.

There will be time after lunch for a tour of the museum with docents on hand to help with questions. The museum with its five galleries features many exhibits on local history and is itself a piece of history, located in Vallejo's Old City Hall.

You will receive another notice regarding the date and more details of the event--likely to be scheduled for January 1996--but in the meantime, please get a couple of friends together and plan to join us.

VANDALISM

Vandals recently damaged the railroad crossing signs that the Lafayette Historical Society installed along the old Sacramento Northern Railroad right of way (now the Lafayette walkway and bike trail). One of the signs, located on the west end of the trail near Stanley School has been removed completely. If you have any information as to the whereabouts of this sign, please contact Marechal Duncan at 283-6812.

Welcome to newest life members, Olive and Bill Wilhelm. Their continued support is appreciated.

Lafayette Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 133 LAFAYETTE, CALIF. 94549

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND RENEWAL FORM

Last name _____ First name _____ Spouses first name _____

Street address _____ Phone number _____

City, state, zip code _____ Date _____

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY

- Collect, preserve, and make available to researchers and the public Lafayette's records, historic materials, photographs
- Disseminate historical information and encourage public interest in local history through programs, exhibits, field trips
- Provide care and maintenance of Lafayette's early fire engine, "Old Betsy"
- Identify and place markers at historic sites
- Newsletter
- Conduct walking tours
- Record and maintain oral histories

Annual dues: Please check appropriate line indicating amount of dues payable, attach your check in the amount shown--adding any contribution you can make toward the fire engine repair fund--and mail to **Lafayette Historical Society, P.O. Box 133, California 94549**.

_____ **Student membership** $ 2.50
_____ **Family membership** $ 10.00
_____ **Business membership** $ 50.00
_____ **Life Membership** $ 100.00

DUES $_____
Contribution to help
Maintain fire engine $_____

TOTAL ENCLOSED $_____

Please indicate your area of special interest

_____ Archives
_____ Landmarks
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_____ Walking Tours
_____ Displays
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_____ Other: _____

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